

California reaches an accord to protect precious delta area

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LOS ANGELES—When the topic is water in the West, it is rare to see people gathered to agree about anything.

That all changed last week, at least temporarily, when federal and state officials, big-city bureaucrats, farmers and environmentalists crowded onto the steps of California's capitol to announce a truce in the state's epic water wars.

After a decade of fighting, the erstwhile enemies agreed to protect a vast river delta east of San Francisco where a rich aquatic ecosystem has been devastated by years of pumping to supply water to two-thirds of California's population and 3 million acres of farmland.

"Peace has broken out amid the water wars," said California Gov. Pete Wilson.

Wilson and others described the accord as crucial to California's recovering \$750 billion economy because it provides some certainty about the state's future water supply. But it also may have an impact far beyond the state's borders.

The plan was crafted to comply with the Endangered Species Act in protecting depleted stocks of salmon and other fish, and federal officials hope to use it as a model when they defend the embattled law under an expected assault in Congress.

"It allows us a very powerful case study [to see] that the Endangered Species Act is workable and can play an important role in finding the balance between the economy and the environment," said Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, who flew to California for the announcement.

"[It proves that] there's plenty of room in California for agriculture, cities, salmon, wetlands, waterfowl and all the other natural wonders

of this state."

The plan was drafted after a year of negotiations stemming from a dispute between the state and federal governments over control of the Sacramento-San Joaquin river delta, California's main watering hole and the largest wetland habitat on the West Coast.

The delta, a 1,200-square mile maze of marshes and streams, is tapped by two gigantic canal systems to supply households all the way to Los Angeles and farmers in the Central Valley, where 45 percent of the nation's fruits and vegetables are grown.

Decades of water pumping have taken a severe toll on the delta's environment. In the late 1980s, federal officials began curtailing the water withdrawals to preserve two endangered species of fish, the Chinook salmon and the Delta smelt.

The severe restrictions were attacked by urban water managers and farmers dependent on delta water, who argued that the demands of the Endangered Species Act were excessive. Wilson backed them up, and a standoff ensued.

The impetus for this month's deal came last spring, when California business leaders wrote letters to President Clinton and Wilson, saying inaction and uncertainty about future water supplies were hampering the state's economy.

The executives usually stay out of water wars, but they feared a shortage could keep business from expanding in Silicon Valley and elsewhere. Then a Wall Street bond-rating agency stepped in, saying the state's credit rating would be downgraded if the delta problem was not solved.

Under the deal, which will last three years, officials negotiated a set amount of water to be left in the delta for fish populations and water quality standards.

The state will manage the

estuary, federal officials will set aside habitat for the smelt, and municipal officials will spend \$10 million for fish protection measures, such as screens over intakes where huge water pumps suck in and kill fish.

The deal means urban and agricultural users will receive less delta water, but they believe the accord gives them a better idea of how to plan for the future.

"Over the last 10 years, it seems like either Congress was passing a law or some fish was listed as endangered and you'd never know from one month to the next what your water supply was," said Brad Shinn, executive director of the California Farm Water Coalition.

Federal officials agreed to having less water in the delta than they wanted, but said they were satisfied with other protections for fish. Most environmentalists embraced the plan, though fishing advocates accused them of caving in out of fear the new Republican-dominated Congress would block any effort for a better accord.

"I hate to be the guy who rains on the parade, but I don't think they were tough enough," said Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations. "The November elections, scared the hell out of them."

If the Endangered Species Act comes before Congress for renewal this year, Babbitt is sure to put the delta deal atop a list of accords struck under the law to show it does not have to be enforced rigidly.

But other supporters of the delta plan say the process could not hide the law's shortcomings.

"While this is an important step, it does not obviate the need to fundamentally reform the Endangered Species Act to provide for economic considerations," said Wilson, a Republican.